

Using Active and Passive Voice

When you're ready to revise a piece of writing, ask yourself whether your words will actively engage your readers' attention and imagination. To ensure that your writing is interesting and exciting to read, check to see whether you've primarily used verbs in the active voice. Remember that an action verb is in the **active voice** when the subject of the sentence performs the action. An action verb is in the **passive voice** when its action is performed on the subject.

Active voice She blurted out the answer.

Passive voice The answer was blurted out by her.

Notice how the first sentence is lively and direct, while the second is wordy and dull. You can improve your writing by revising instances where you've used the passive instead of the active voice.

There are times, however, when the passive voice is useful. As a general rule, use the passive voice when you don't know who performed the action, when the performer is unimportant, or when you want to conceal the performer's identity. The sentences below show appropriate uses of the passive voice.

- Animal images **were painted** on the walls of the cave.
(Who painted them is unknown.)
- Rome **was not built** in a day. (Who built it is unimportant.)
- Mistakes **were made**. (The writer doesn't want to identify who made them.)

EXERCISE The sentences below are written in the passive voice. Rewrite each sentence in the active voice; however, when the use of the passive voice is appropriate, write *correct*.

Sample A quirk of the brain is shared by ten people in a million.

Revision Ten people in a million share a quirk of the brain.

1. Five senses—sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch—are experienced by all of us.

2. For a few people, those five senses are tangled together.

3. Shapes are heard by some of them.

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4. Colors are tasted by others.

5. This quirk of the brain is perceived differently by different people.

6. It is called *synesthesia*.

7. "Sensing together" is meant by *synesthesia*, a combination of the Greek words *syn* (together) and *aisthesis* (sensation).

8. In people with synesthesia, one sense is triggered by another.

9. Synesthesia has been lived with by many creative people.

10. The letters of the alphabet were seen in colors by writer Vladimir Nabokov.

11. The letter *k*, for example, was perceived by him as huckleberry blue.

12. Colors were associated with musical tones by the composer Aleksandr Scriabin.

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13. An A-major chord was heard by him as green.

14. Flavors were perceived as shapes by one person.

15. A bland chicken was once described by this person as not having "enough points."

16. Baked beans were tasted by another person at the sound of the word *Francis*.

17. The existence of synesthesia has been known for over two hundred years.

18. It has been figured out by scientists only in the last few decades, however.

19. It was concluded by a leading researcher that everyone's brain is capable of synesthesia.

20. Even so, conscious awareness of it is reached by only a few people.

